

Book Review

Kuhn, Christian and Stefan Bießenecker (eds.). 2012. *Valenzen des Lachens in der Vormoderne (1250–1750)* [*Valences of laughter in the Pre-modern period (1250–1750)*]. Bamberg Historical Studies 8. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press. 461 pp. €22.00 (print version). ISBN 978-3-86309-098-2. E-text available from: <http://www.uni-bamberg.de/ubp/>. eISBN: 978-3-86309-099-9.

What does laughter communicate about social relationships? This question becomes even more intricate when we look at texts from different cultures and times. From a grammatical viewpoint one could reframe this question in terms of the “valences” of the verb “to laugh”: Who is laughing about whom? This volume places this question within the larger sociological perspective on laughter in Europe between the end of the Middle Ages and the French Revolution, or between 1250 and 1750 (p. 15). The eighteen contributions offer various interdisciplinary perspectives on laughter and humor in academic communication, literary texts and historiography. More specifically, the contributions in this volume will be of interest to anyone who is working with historical fictional and factual reports of laughter, or with satirical texts that are difficult to explain without taking their particular social contexts into account.

The introduction by Biessenecker and Kuhn provides a good overview of recent theoretical approaches to the use of humor and laughter through history (in contrast to general transhistorical theories such as the General Theory of Verbal Humor, which is mentioned on p. 14). Unfortunately, only a few theoretical background concepts are revisited in the following section on “theoretical perspectives on laughter and its potential in communicative action”. Bakhtin’s work on carnival receives particular attention: Kohler’s contribution “Karneval und kultureller Raum” [Carnival and cultural space] (pp. 31–52) provides a well informed description of Bakhtin’s development of the concept “carnival” from his early study of Dostoyevsky in 1929 to the late publication of the dissertation on Rabelais in 1965. Kohler claims that the transfer of the concept of carnival from the domain of folk culture to literature comes along with a disappearance (or domestication) of physical laughter (p. 36). In a different vein, Theresa Hamilton applies the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) to examples from a 16th century jest-book. Hamilton claims that the GTVH is able to investigate the historical peculiarities of humorous short prose when supplemented by an “episodical knowledge resource”. Inspired by Fludernik’s “natural narratology” and Waletzky and Labov’s seminal narrative studies, she proposes a basic episodical structure of INCipit, INCiDent and RESults that might also be applied to older texts.

There is a third contribution in this theoretical section on laughter in European historiography by Gerrit Walther. I was disappointed with this translation of a talk given 18 years ago, with fuzzy terminology and without any updates. In fact, Walther's contribution is one of a few examples in this volume which appear to suggest that claiming historical relativism of humor is an excuse for ignoring the current state of humor research and theory. Another example is Hiram Kümper's closing "essay" on "sexuality, violence, and humor", which explicitly ignores international humor research from the last 60 years. In the present volume I did learn a lot about the use of laughter in the constitution of pre-modern academic circles, and I would suggest examining the efficiency of these rituals by applying them to arrogant academics who take no notice of the work of their colleagues.

Besides a theoretical section, the present volume contains four additional sections that focus on particular functions of laughter. Even if this arrangement is meant to overcome the stereotypical arrangement of chapters divided by humorous genres, it is apparent that the second section "on laughter as a means of producing coherence and meaning" is principally about the difficulties of interpreting laughter in literary texts such as Eilhart's and Gottfried's *Tristan* adaptations (in Seeber), and in epic adaptations of the Arthur and Dietrich legends (Grafetstätter). Finally, Coxon provides a typology of narrative representations of laughter in the popular book of the medieval trickster Till Eulenspiegel [Till Owlglass].

The third section discusses the use laughter in the formation of academic in-groups ("Das Lachen in gruppeninterner Kommunikation gelehrter Kulturen"). Becker discovers "laughing communities" among Renaissance scholars in the context of Ulrich von Hutten and Erasmus' quarrel about the *Letters of Obscure Men* (*Epistolae obscurorum virorum*). Grebe demonstrates that some self-portraits by Albrecht Dürer (which show him in extravagant outfits, with a beard and long hair) were joking targets within the Humanist community. Finally, Kühn investigates the use of laughter in the communications within and between competing academic factions in 17th and 18th century England. The fourth section, on the construction of identity through laughter ("Identitätsbildung und Abgrenzung durch Lachen"), contains additional contributions on the topic of satirical communications among scholars: Bollbuck discusses the development of satirical attacks in confessional debates in the genre of the pasquil, and Lastraioli's contribution on "laughing about other's knowledge" describes the use of the so-called "anti-paradox pasquil" in a scholarly dispute on the medical use of vinegar. The remaining contributions in this section describe cultural specific concepts of humor: Pökel investigates the concepts of laughter, seriousness and banter in Arabian culture with a particular focus on the work of the writer al-Jahiz (d. 869).

Susanne Lachenicht's contribution on laughter and satire in protestant England in the 16th and 18th centuries starts out with the relativist claim that laughter can only be understood in its historical and cultural context, but ends up with the fairly generalizable observation that laughter was used to construe national identity in contrast to other religions. Finally, Schörle discusses the well-known shift away from satirical laughter to good-natured laughter of humor in England during the 18th century.

The fifth and last section on "laughter as an instrument of power" provides discussions of fascinating reports of laughter-events which are difficult to understand from a modern perspective. Jostkleigrew describes instances of political laughter in the rebellion of Sicilian Vespers in 1282 against the French regent Charles I of Anjou, which was explained by contemporary observers as an armed reaction against the denigrating satirical French laughter at Sicilian customs. Jostkleigrew understands these discussions of laughter as early markers of a "public sphere". Lang analyzes a series of Florentine anecdotes about Cosimo de' Medici the Elder, in which Cosimo marks social difference by laughter. Hennig discusses narrations of laughter in Old Norse sagas which are not only connected to satire, but which are (from time to time) also markers of prophetic statements, mental illness, stupidity or even heroism.

The present volume provides various interesting and inspiring descriptions and discussions of laughter events and humorous text types. I learnt most from contributions that actually ventured into the description of social actors in laughing communities ("Lachgemeinschaften"), as they shed new light on shifts in historical functions of laughter and changes in adequateness criteria of laughter.

Ralf Müller: University of Fribourg, Switzerland. E-mail: ralph.mueller@unifr.ch